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Debunking the Myth of the Efficacy of “Push-down Academics”: How Rigid, Teacher-Centered, Academic Early Learning Environments Dis-Empower Young Children

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Within the United States, the field of early childhood education has traditionally been dominated by an emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) which mostly refers to the need to structure learning environments for young children based on theories of development (Bredekamp, 1987; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Developmentally appropriate practices themselves draw from a long history of “child centered” philosophies of education (Viruru, 2001; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Madrid & Dunn-Kenney, 2010) which emphasize the idea of natural growth in children and ultimately privilege the development of logical reasoning and rational thinking as the main goal of childhood (Burman, 2016). Although this enshrinement of developmentally appropriate practice as the universal standard for what constitutes quality early childhood programs has been debated by critics on the basis that they often represent Euro-Western perspectives (Bloch & Kim, 2015). American early childhood educators have mostly agreed that formal academic instruction should not form the core of the early childhood curriculum. Thus, the turn towards push down academics stands in contrast to long standing traditions within the field of early childhood education (Carlsson-Paige, Almon, & McLaughlin, 2015; Alford, Rollins, Padron & Waxman, 2016). As Bloch and Kim (2015) have said, over time early childhood programs in the United States have come to focus on “social habits, social-emotional skills, language skills, intellectual or problem-solving or cognitive skills (labels varied with time), physical (fine and large motor) skills, and moral skills and attitudes.” (p. 4). They also point out that the history of early childhood education shows that expectations often varied in terms of what kinds of skills were considered necessary for what children, mostly based on social class. For example, programs for young children in poverty often focused on the development of basic numeracy and literacy skills, rising from the belief that their home environments did not support those. It is only recently however that early childhood programs have widely begun to focus on core academics.

How the myth became popular

The belief in and popularity of “push down-academics” is thought to have gained traction with the development and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act during the Bush Administration (Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, 2016). Of particular concern to early childhood educators is the mandate that all children be able to meet expectations on a reading assessment by the third-grade (White House, 2003). As mentioned above, although developmental approaches to early education have received some criticism, push down methods were not commonly practiced in large

numbers of early childhood classrooms across the nation until much more recently. It was not until standardized testing became nationalized that push down academics reemerged (Russell, 2011; Hatch, 2002). Even though standardized testing under the NCLB guidelines does not start until a child enters the 3rd grade many researchers and practitioners argue that the pressure on teachers to have their students perform well on tests has inadvertently created an “accountability shovedown” (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, MacKay & Marshall, 2013; Bassok et al., 2016, Arby et al., 2015). This accountability shovedown is an attempt by educators and administrators to build stronger academic skills at a younger age so that when the students are old enough to be tested they are more likely to perform well on the tests (Dickinson, 1999). Consequently, early childhood teachers who may have once focused on building socioemotional skills and introducing young children to basic academic content quickly transitioned into expecting children to know how to read upon entry into kindergarten (Davies & Harré, 1990). Eventually, kindergarten teachers have come to spend less time creating opportunities for social engagement and more time on the reading and writing initiatives that children may be tested on as they progress to 3rd grade (Dickinson, 1999). Further, parents as well as educators have begun to hold higher expectations in terms of academic skill development (Dickinson, 1999). Historically, parents were thought to utilize Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten classrooms as a way to introduce academic lessons to their children and expose them to social environments. However, as the standardization and higher expectations of academic skill mastery increased, expectations of what young children should learn and know have also increased (Russell, 2011). Many parents of young children even practice what is called “redshirting” where they hold back their child and keep them in an extra year of preschool so that they are prepared to handle the academic rigor that is now known as kindergarten (Dickinson, 1999; Lehrer & Bastien, 2015; Peters, Ortiz, & Swadener, 2011).

Although NCLB has been known to influence the shift in the commonality of push-down academics it does not fully account for the popularity of push-down academics amongst educators and parents (Goldstein, 2007). As highly debated as the implementation of push-down academics has been, by some it has also been viewed as representing a positive shift towards teaching children more academic concepts at an earlier age (Duncan, 2007). Many educators have come to subscribe to the idea that teaching more academic skills at the preschool level will increase opportunities for the child to be ready for kindergarten (Bassok et

al, 2007). By encouraging school readiness for preschoolers, kindergarten teachers are able to expose children to and introduce academic content earlier (Bassok et al., 2007). This hope for positive long-term outcomes seems to be a strong contributor towards the limited welcome that the implementation of push-down academics has received (Bassok et al., 2007)

Why is the efficacy of push-down academics a myth?

Even with the widespread popularity of push down academics and the belief that having stronger academic accountability will benefit children long-term in terms of later academic success, the research on the effectiveness of push-down academics is varied (Duncan, 2007). Many studies have contradicted its efficacy and have critiqued the results of studies that encourage academic rigor at a younger age (Brown and Mowry, 2015). For example, a study assessing School Readiness and Later Achievement, concluded that children entering kindergarten with developed math and reading skills are likely to display stronger academic performances in later grades (Duncan et al., 2007). In contrast, a study by Adcock and Patton, that analyzed the views of effective early childhood educators under standardized systematic constraints concluded that early childhood teachers felt, “the demand for standardized curriculum has pushed out developmental considerations as well as the needs of the young child” (2001, p.206). This concern of early childhood educators is mirrored in later studies that reveal a shift in teacher instructional practices and schools’ minimization of programs that have been traditionally utilized to promote good mental health, emotional, and physical development (Arby, 2015).

Many researchers contest that an increased focus on academics can limit or even eliminate a focus on the non-academic components of early childhood programs that contribute positively to a young child’s development, such as music, art, and play. Many scholars believe that spending more time on content forces teacher to overlook building a child’s social or self-regulatory skills (Bassok et al., 2015, Hatch, 2002). For example, Arby and Latham’s (2015) study reveals that early childhood educators who hold higher academic expectations for young children can skew teacher’s beliefs in their student’s capabilities:

A misalignment in teachers’ beliefs was associated with negative outcomes for children, even after accounting for preschool (i.e. baseline) measures of reading and math ability...the strongest

associations were apparent across domains such that misalignment in teacher's beliefs regarding a particular area of competence affected children's kindergarten adjustment in another area of development. For example, misalignment in teacher's beliefs regarding the importance of academic skills predicted lower social skills (2015, p. 85).

This study reveals that when teachers develop misaligned beliefs that focus on greater accountability for young children to master higher academic content, it can not only negatively impact children's academic achievement but also negatively affect their socioemotional development. Other studies have also revealed similar findings about the effect of push down academics on young learners. For example, some studies have shown clear negative consequences on children's literacy development when the focus is on preparing children for standardized tests (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Implications of the belief in push down academics

Hatch (2002) as well as Elkind (1987) have identified 10 areas in which push down academics can negatively impact children, which are outlined below:

1. Pressure on the child
Standardization and higher expectations may lead to negative impacts such as elevated stress and pressure to meet higher expectations. Standardization can also lead teachers to put pressure on young children to reach goals that they may not be developmentally prepared for. This pressure from educators does not take into account research that clearly documents that young children develop at different levels and different paces (Arby et al., 2015; Hatch, 2002).
2. Pressure on teachers
Not only does the "accountability shovedown" potentially put pressure on children to succeed but it also places extreme pressure on educators. The increased focus on standards and readiness could discourage teachers from focusing on educating the whole child and limits them to focusing strictly on achieving academic competencies (O'Brien & Down, 2002; Fuller, 2013).
3. Narrowing of Experiences

When teachers are focused on keeping up with the demands of higher standards put on young children, it can cause them to narrow opportunities for experiential learning. Learning opportunities are limited to what may eventually be tested and not focused on what the educators know to be appropriate for young children (Graus, 2009; Goldstein, 2007).

4. **Accountability as Punishment**
When children or teachers are not successful in meeting required standards of achievement a punishment approach is often adopted. Educators may be portrayed as ineffective and students are portrayed as inefficient. In turn, as a punishment for the failure to achieve set standards, educators lose credibility and the child risks being held back or labeled as having a learning disability (Hatch, 2007; Goldstein, 2007).
5. **Teacher Deprofessionalization**
People who set the standards of what children are supposed to be also define the roles of teachers and limit their capabilities. When teachers are tightly constrained as to how and what to educate we “signal students, parents, and society at large that teachers are not to be trusted or respected and that technical/managerial control is what is needed to fix problems” (Hatch, 2002, p.459).
6. **Performance over learning**
When educators focus exclusively on children meeting set objectives and benchmarks at an early age they risk valuing performance over learning. Children can become more focused on memorization and meeting performance goals rather than engaging in the experience of learning (Hatch, 2007; Bassok et al., 2007).
7. **Individual Devaluation**
Push down academics or accountability shovedown supports the perception of “one size fits all”. It takes away the individualistic pattern of development in young children. We begin to see children as all the same with no difference or uniqueness about them. Seeing children from this perspective limits foundational educational practices in sound and quality early childhood programming (Brown and Mowry, 2015; Hatch, 2002).
8. **Sameness vs. Diversity**

In connection with individual devaluation, standardization also tunnels and waters down the impact that cultural identity has on learning. Many who take on this perspective come from the dominant culture. Therefore, the standards that we push on children may not represent lessons and learning that are complimentary to their culture or even recognize the fact that diversity exists in classrooms (Hatch, 2002).

9. Looking at Who Truly Benefit

A question that has not been fully explored in the literature is that of who truly benefits from “accountability shovedowns”. What does the research evidence say about how this style of learning impacts young children? Are we helping the child or are we helping the policies developed from these pushed and aggressive academic outcomes? (Hatch, 2007)

10. Corporate Mentality

Lastly, with the increase of standardization and assessment practices at an earlier age, the question has been raised as to what messages are being conveyed to young children as to what matters. Shovedown approaches often corporatize classrooms and push down agendas that can be about profit. However, it is important to recognize that, “teachers are not “blue suits” who either meet corporate quotas or are fired. Education is not a commodity to be produced, marketed, and sold” (Hatch, 2002, p.461).

Many researchers concur with the dilemmas and areas of concern that Elkind and Hatch have raised. Brown and Mowry (2015) argue that we must stay cognizant of the fact that younger children learn differently than older children. When we do not recognize differences in how young children learn, we put the same expectations on a kindergartner that we do on a 4th grade student. Consequently, younger learners miss out on building socioemotional skills and engaging with nonacademic elements of the curriculum such as art and music (Bossok, et al., 2016). Further, according to Arby, push down academics can affect the way that an educator views children. Many kindergarten educators are starting to push higher standards on children at a younger age, regardless of the abilities of the children to master or achieve the goals that teachers set at the beginning of the year (Arby et al., 2015).

The implications of push down academics on early childhood environments.

Pushing down academics on a child at an earlier age does not simply impact children but educators’ beliefs about children’s capabilities and rising from that belief, their abilities to engage or disengage with children (Arby et al., 2015). If an educator holds the belief that a child should master high levels of content at an age where they are often still developing basic learning skills, deficit orientations are encouraged. The way that children perceive themselves and a way that they build positive self-efficacy is through quality teacher engagement. If a teacher sees a child as a deficit it can negatively affect the way that the child views their academic abilities and their desire to build new knowledge by trying out new opportunities. Further, such a belief shifts the focus away from trying to maximize the potential for growth for each child and towards viewing children in economic terms such as latent human capital (Bradbury, 2012; Moss, 2012). Other scholars have argued that pushdown academics, particularly those tied to performance on standardized tests, leads to a depersonalization of educational environments, as both teachers and students view themselves as being reduced to mere pieces of data (Hutchings, 2015, Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury (ibid) have also suggested that an exclusive focus on academics in early childhood education can lead to a “triage” mentality in schools, wherein attention diverts towards those children who can, with help, pass the tests, to the detriment of the other learners in classrooms. Further, Piker & Jewkes (2014) have pointed out that by turning the focus in early childhood towards academics above all else, other pressing issues within the field of early childhood education such as “solutions for increasing ECE teacher wages, providing childcare options for working families, endorsing curriculum that positions children as active learners, and training for current ECE teachers” have been sidelined (p. 5). Another indirect implication of the pushdown academics movement has been a movement towards increasing the average age of children entering kindergarten. Studies show that having an earlier cutoff date increases state standardized scores in both the 4th and 8th grades, thus placing indirect pressure on states to move cutoff dates to earlier in the year (Fletcher & Kim, 2016). Recent data show that already approximately nine percent of children entering kindergarten have already turned six years old (Liu, 2016).

How to address/debunk the myth and why this is important

It is critical that the myth of the benefits of “push down academics” gets stronger critical attention and societal push back. Rethinking the increase of standardization or “curriculum shovedown” instructional approaches is vital in maintaining the balance between a sound academic curriculum that also recognizes that children in the early ages are developing at rapidly different paces (Hatch, 2002; Brown & Mowry, 2015). The foundation of push down academics is grounded in the philosophy of one size fits all in education. It limits professionals working with children by defining all children purely as learners who are designed to absorb information. Such views minimize and marginalize the complexities and diversity of the culturally diverse early childhood classrooms found all over the United States.

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